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SUBJECT: ELECTION RISK MAPS HIGHLIGHT REGIONAL THREATS

REF: A. BOGOTA 6688 B. BOGOTA 6013

SUMMARY

¶1. In mid-September, the civil society Electoral Observation Mission (MOE) published maps identifying 576 of Colombia's 1099 municipalities as at risk for violence or electoral fraud during the October 28 departmental and municipal elections. Interior Minister Carlos Holguin dismissed the MOE figures as exaggerated, putting the number of municipalities at risk at 79. Opposition leaders said the GOC's estimate accurately identifies the areas at risk of violence, but said MOE's higher number better captures the danger of electoral fraud or illegal campaign spending. The GOC has taken numerous steps to protect candidates and limit electoral irregularities. MOE and the OAS will deploy election observers to support GOC efforts; most expect the elections to occur with few serious incidents. End Summary.

MOE RISK MAP: 576 MUNICIPALITIES AT RISK?

¶2. In mid-September, the civil society group Electoral Observation Mission (MOE) published a series of election risk maps indicating that 576 of Colombia's 1099 municipalities are at some risk for violence or electoral fraud in the October 28 departmental and municipal elections. The maps reflect eleven variables that measure the threat to electoral integrity, including a tradition of voter fraud or manipulation, the presence of illegal armed groups, and a history of political violence (see ref A). The departments at greatest risk are Meta, Antioquia, Valle del Cauca, and Caqueta.

GOC RESPONSE: 79 IS MORE ACCURATE

¶3. Minister of Interior and Justice Carlos Holguin dismissed the MOE figure as exaggerated. He estimated that only 79 municipalities, mostly in sparsely populated rural areas, face significant risks, and said the GOC is taking measures to safeguard the process in these areas. Holguin said the GOC will assign 75,000 police and 102,000 military personnel to protect polling stations during elections, and is providing special protection to candidates at risk. The GOC

has also transferred local registrars in districts at risk for fraud, held weekly local coordination meetings with security and other institutions, and set up a rapid deployment force to prevent and investigate election irregularities (see reftels).

¶4. Despite the GOC efforts, attacks against candidates continue, albeit at lower levels than in the past. Local think tank director Leon Valencia said the FARC and other illegal armed groups are the greatest threats to elections. Valencia agreed the 79 municipalities named by the GOC are at greatest risk, and said MOE and other groups had higher figures because they used general criteria (like the "presence" of armed groups) in their analysis. Liberal Party official Rafael Pardo said the GOC's estimate of 79 municipalities accurately identifies the areas at risk of violence, but said MOE's higher estimate better reflects the danger of electoral fraud or illegal campaign spending. A senior GOC official agreed that illegal campaign finance and vote buying would be major problems in many departments.

UNANIMOUS: 2007 RISKS MUCH LOWER THEN PAST

¶5. Our contacts, including MOE, acknowledge there have been far fewer deaths, kidnappings and threats to candidates during the 2007 election season than in previous campaigns. In many municipalities, political parties and candidates have pledged to adhere to guidelines proposed by the GOC regarding campaign contributions and candidate selection. Moreover, local registrars and inspector generals (procuradoria) continue to provide more oversight of pre-election activities than in recent years. Candidates from leftist parties, including the Polo Democratico, are running in areas previously dominated by armed groups and paramilitaries. In cooperation with the GOC, MOE (supported by USAID) will deploy 10,000 trained observers on election day. The OAS electoral observation mission and other independent observation initiatives are also set to support GOC efforts to mitigate threats and limit electoral irregularities.
Brownfield